

August 17th  
Peak District, UK

DS Joanna Harper stood on the viaduct with the other police officers. On the far bank, across the great expanse of the reservoir, a woman paused at the water's edge, about to go in, her twin baby boys held tightly in her arms.

Harper turned to the DI. 'How close are the officers on that side?'

Dense woodland surrounded the scrap of shore where the woman stood. Even at this distance, Harper could see that her legs were scarlet with blood from the thorns.

'Not close enough,' said Thrupp. 'They can't find a way to get to her.'

In a fury of thudding, the helicopter flew over their heads, disturbing the surface of the reservoir, bellowing its command: *Step away from the water*. It loomed above the tiny figure of the mother, deafening and relentless, but the officers on board wouldn't be able to stop her. There was nowhere in the valley where the craft could make a safe landing, or get low enough to drop the winch.

Through the binoculars, Harper saw the woman collapse into

a sitting position on the dried-out silt, her face turned to the sky, still clutching the babies. Perhaps she wouldn't do it, after all.

A memory surfaced then, of what the old lady had said to her:

'She'll have to put them in the water, if she wants her own babies back . . . Right under the water. Hold 'em down.'

The woman wasn't sitting at the water's edge anymore; she was knee-deep, and wading further in. The DS kicked off her shoes, climbed up on the rail and prepared to dive.

# Chapter 1

The child is not mine as the first was,  
I cannot sing it to rest,  
I cannot lift it up fatherly  
And bliss it upon my breast;  
Yet it lies in my little one's cradle  
And sits in my little one's chair,  
And the light of the heaven she's gone to  
Transfigures its golden hair.

FROM *The Changeling*

BY JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL

July 13th  
8.10 p.m.

All she cared about was that the pain had been taken away. With it, the fear, and the certainty that she would die, all gone in the space of a few miraculous seconds. She wanted to drift off but then Patrick's worried face appeared, topped by a green hospital cap and she remembered: I'm having my babies. The spinal injection she'd been given didn't just signal the end of the horrendous contractions, but the beginning of a forceps extraction procedure that could still go wrong. The first baby was stuck in the birth canal. So, instead of allowing herself to sink inside her glorious, warm cocoon of numbness and fall asleep – which she hadn't

done for thirty-six hours – she tried to concentrate on what was happening.

The doctor's face appeared, near to Lauren's own, the mask pulled down revealing her mouth and most of her chin. The woman's lips were moving as if untethered to her words. It was the drugs, and the exhaustion; the world had slowed right down. Lauren frowned. The doctor was looking at her, but she seemed so far away. She's talking to me, thought Lauren, I should listen.

'Ok, Mrs Tranter, because of the spinal, you won't be able to tell when you have a contraction – so I'll tell you when to push, ok?'

Lauren's mouth formed an 'o', but the doctor had already gone.

'Push.'

She felt the force of the doctor pulling and her entire body slid down the bed with it. She couldn't tell if she was pushing or not. She made an effort to arrange her face in an expression of straining and tensed her neck muscles, but somewhere in her head a voice said, why bother? They won't be able to tell if I don't push, will they? Maybe I could just have a little sleep.

She shut her eyes.

'Push now.'

The doctor pulled again and the dreaminess dispersed as the first one came out. Lauren opened her eyes and everything was back in focus, events running at the right speed, or perhaps slightly too quickly now. She held her breath, waiting for the sound of crying. When it finally came, that sound, thin and reedy, the weakened protest of something traumatised, she cried too. The tears seemed projectile, they were so pent-up. Patrick squeezed her hand.

'Let me see,' she said, and that was when the baby was placed on his mother's chest, but on his back, arse-to-chin with Lauren so that all she could see were his folded froggy legs, and a tiny arm, flailing in the air. Patrick bent over them both, squinting at the baby, laughing, then crying and pressing his finger into one little palm.

‘Can’t you turn him around?’ she said, but nobody did. Then she was barely aware of the doctor saying, ‘push,’ again, and another pull. The boy was whisked away and the second one placed there.

This time she could reach up and turn the baby to face her. She held him in a cradle made of her two arms and studied his face, the baby studying her at the same time, his little mouth in a trumpeter’s pout, no white visible in his half-open eyes but a deep thoughtful blue. Although the babies were genetically identical, she and Patrick had expected that there would be slight differences. They’re individuals. Two bonnie boys, she thought with a degree of slightly forced joviality, at the same time as, could I just go to sleep now? Would anyone notice, really?

‘Riley,’ said Patrick, with one hand gently touching Lauren’s face and one finger stroking the baby’s, ‘Yes?’

Lauren felt pressured. She thought they might leave naming them for a few days until they got to know them properly. Such a major decision, what if they got it wrong?

‘Riley?’ she said, ‘I suppose—’

Patrick had straightened up, his phone in his hand already.

‘What about the other one? Rupert?’

Rupert? That wasn’t even on the list. It was like he was trying to get names past her while she was distracted, having been pumped full of drugs and laid out flat, paralysed from the chest down, vulnerable to suggestion. Not fair.

‘No,’ she said, a little bit too loudly. ‘He’s called Morgan.’

Patrick’s brow creased. He glanced in the direction of possibly-Morgan, who was being checked over by the paediatrician. ‘Really?’ He put his phone back in his pocket.

‘You can’t stay long,’ said the nurse-midwife to Patrick, as the bed finally rolled into place. Sea-green curtains were whisked out of the way. Lauren wanted to protest: she’d hoped there would be

some time to properly settle in with the babies before they threw her husband out of the ward.

The trip from theatre to the maternity ward involved hundreds of metres of corridor. Thousands of metres, maybe. Patrick had been wheeling the trolley containing one of the twins, while the nurse drove the bed containing Lauren, who was holding the other one. The small procession clanked wordlessly along the route through the yellow-lit corridors. At first Lauren thought that Patrick could have offered to swap with the nurse and take the heavier burden, but she soon became glad she hadn't mentioned it. As they approached the ward it was clear the woman knew what she was doing. This nurse, who was half Patrick's height just about, had used her entire bodyweight to counter-balance as the bed swung around a corner and into the bay, then, impressively, she'd stepped up and ridden it like a sailboard into one of the four empty cubicles, the one by the window. There was a single soft 'clang' as the head of the bed gently touched the wall. Patrick would only have crashed them into something expensive.

The nurse operated the brake and gave a brisk, 'here we are!' before delivering her warning to Patrick, indicating the clock on the wall opposite. 'Fifteen minutes,' she said.

Her shoes squeaked away up the ward. Lauren and Patrick looked at the babies.

'Which one have you got?' asked Patrick.

She turned the little name tag on the delicate wrist of the sleeping child in her arms. The words *Baby Tranter #1* were written on it in blue sharpie.

'Morgan,' said Lauren.

Patrick bent over the trolley containing the other one. Later, everyone would say that the twins looked like their father, but at this moment she couldn't see a single similarity between the fully grown man and the scrunched-up bud of a baby. The boys

certainly resembled each other – two peas popped from the same pod, or the same pea, twice. Riley had the same wrinkled little face as his brother, the same long fingers and uncannily perfect fingernails. They made the same expression when they yawned. Slightly irritatingly, someone in theatre had dressed them in identical white sleep suits, taken from the bag Lauren and Patrick had brought with them, though there had been other colours available. She had intended to dress one of them in yellow. Without the name tags they could easily have been mistaken for each other and how would anyone ever know? Thank goodness for the name tags, then. In her arms, Morgan moved his head from side to side and half-opened his eyes. She watched them slowly close.

They'd been given a single trolley for both babies to sleep in. Riley was lying under Patrick's gaze in the clear plastic cot-tray bolted to the top of the trolley. Underneath the baby there was a firm, tightly fitting mattress, and folded at either end of this were two blankets printed with the name of the hospital. The cot was the wrong shape for its cargo. The plastic tray and the mattress were unforgivingly flat, and the baby was a ball. A woodlouse in your palm, one that curls up when frightened. Patrick moved the trolley slightly, abruptly, and Riley's little arms and legs flew out, a five-pointed star. He curled up slowly, at the same speed as his brother's closing eyes. Back in a ball, he came to rest slightly on his side. To hold a baby, it ought to be bowl-shaped, a little nest. Why had no one thought of that before?

'Hello, Riley,' said Patrick in an odd squeaky voice. He straightened up. 'It sounds weird, saying that.'

Lauren reached out and drew the trolley closer to her bed, carefully, trying to prevent the little ball from rolling. She used her one free hand to tuck a blanket over him and down the sides of the mattress, to hold him in place.

'Hello, Riley,' she said. 'Yeah, it does a bit. I think that's normal, though. We'll get used to it.' She turned her face to the child in

her arms. ‘Hello, Morgan,’ she said. She was still waiting for the rush of love. That one you feel, all at once the second they’re born, like nothing you’ve ever experienced before. The rush of love that people with children always go on about. She’d been looking forward to it. It worried her that she hadn’t felt it yet.

She handed Morgan to Patrick, who held him as if he were a delicate antique pot he’d just been told was worth more than the house; desperate to put him down, unsure where, terrified something might happen. Lauren found it both funny and concerning. When the baby – who could probably sense these things – started to cry, Patrick froze, a face of nearly cartoon panic. Morgan’s crying caused Riley to wake up and cry, too.

‘Put him in there, next to Riley,’ said Lauren. The twins had been together all their lives. She wondered what that would mean for them, later on. They’d been with her, growing inside her, for nine months, the three of them together every second of every day for the whole of their existence so far. She felt relief that they were no longer in there, and guilt at feeling that relief, and a great loss that they had taken the first step away from her, the first of all the subsequent, inevitable steps away from her. Was that the love, that guilty feeling? That sense of loss? Surely not.

Patrick placed the squalling package face to face with his double, and, a miracle, the crying ceased. They both reached out, wrapping miniature arms around each other’s downy heads, Morgan holding onto Riley’s ear. All was calm. From above, they looked like an illusion. An impossibility. Lauren checked again, but as far as she could tell the rush of love still had not arrived.

The fierce nurse squeaked back down the ward at just after nine and began to shoo Patrick away home, which would leave Lauren, still numb in the legs and unable to move, alone to deal with every need and desire of the two newborn babies.

'You can't leave me,' said Lauren.

'You can't stay,' said the nurse.

'I'll be back,' said Patrick, 'first thing. As soon as they open the doors. Don't worry.'

He kissed her head, and both babies. He walked away a little too quickly.